



Time for US to normalize ties with Pyongyang

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By Ted Galen Carpenter (China Daily)

With past and present policies clearly not working, it's time for a bold approach

US leaders have painted themselves into a corner regarding policy toward North Korea. For more than two decades, Washington's strategy has been to offer Pyongyang a stark choice: give up its nuclear program or face ever-greater isolation from the international community. President Barack Obama was especially blunt about presenting that alternative to North Korean leaders during his early weeks in office.

That approach clearly has not worked. Indeed, the Obama administration has created the risk of the worst possible outcome - a North Korea that is a nuclear power but lacks meaningful international economic ties, and has no formal diplomatic or economic relations with the US. It would be a blueprint for even more dangerous tensions on the Korean Peninsula and throughout East Asia than we face currently.

A new, radically different approach is needed. Instead of continuing the futile strategy of isolating North Korea, Washington should adopt a comprehensive strategy to normalize relations with Pyongyang. And China has a crucial role to play as the primary facilitator in that process.

The US would need to offer a number of conciliatory measures. Perhaps the most important step is to change the atmosphere of unrelenting hostility between the two countries. North Korean leaders undoubtedly fear that Washington might use its vast military power to intimidate Pyongyang or even engage in forcible regime change, as it did with Saddam Hussein. To reduce tensions, the Obama administration should offer to sign a non-aggression pact with North Korea. US leaders should also propose a peace treaty formally ending the armed hostilities on the Korean Peninsula.

This is where China's assistance could be extremely valuable. Since there is a pervasive lack of trust between the US and North Korean governments, it is predictable that the

Kim government might react to such a constructive proposal with skepticism, perhaps even outright suspicion of a trap. Beijing can help overcome that problem, urging the North Korean government not to pass up such an important, unprecedented opportunity.

Realism on that score is necessary, though. US opinion leaders tend to overstate China's influence on North Korea. A few years ago, New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman asserted that the Chinese government could end the North Korea nuclear crisis with a simple phone call to Pyongyang. That attitude, which is fairly typical in the American foreign policy community, is absurd. Beijing does not, and cannot, dictate to the North Korean government.

But to the extent that North Korean leaders trust anyone outside their own country, China enjoys by far the greatest degree of trust. The Chinese government can use that influence to, in a quiet, subtle fashion, induce Pyongyang not to spurn an olive branch from Washington.

In addition to offering a non-aggression pledge and a peace treaty formally ending the Korean War, the Obama administration should propose to end the diplomatic chill on the peninsula. During the Cold War, Washington repeatedly proposed "cross recognition" of the two Korean governments. In other words, Moscow and Beijing would recognize Seoul, and Washington would recognize Pyongyang. That step was considered a prelude to North and South Korea establishing diplomatic relations with each other. The suggested pattern was similar to the thaw in relations that occurred regarding the two Germanys.

Once the Cold War ended, Beijing and Moscow did establish diplomatic - and extensive economic - relations with South Korea. But Washington reneged on its promise regarding North Korea. That decision needs to be reversed. The Obama administration should agree to establish formal diplomatic relations with North Korea, including the setting up of embassies and consulates in both countries.

Finally, Washington needs to terminate its economic "cold war" against North Korea. The administration should commit to rescind most of the current US economic sanctions on Pyongyang and to support the repeal of UN resolutions authorizing international economic sanctions. Some of those actions can be implemented by executive order. Others will require congressional approval, which is admittedly uncertain. But it is imperative for the Obama administration to do what it can through executive orders, and to go on record as favoring the normalization of economic relations.

Of course, Washington will want some concessions from Pyongyang in exchange for these proffered benefits. The most important goal would be with regard to the nuclear issue.

Realism is crucial regarding that point. The notion that Pyongyang would abandon all nuclear ambitions was overly optimistic from the outset. Yet that has been a key premise of the Six-Party Talks. Given that North Korea probably has processed enough plutonium

over the past decade to build several nuclear weapons, and has an active uranium-enrichment program, such a maximalist goal is now completely detached from reality.

Washington should instead focus on getting North Korea to stop short of actually deploying an arsenal. That status of "one screwdriver turn away" from being a full-fledged nuclear-weapons power is hardly ideal, but it's probably the best US leaders can expect from North Korea - even in exchange for a new, normal relationship between the two countries.

A second concession the Obama administration should seek is a redeployment of North Korean military units away from the demilitarized zone on the border with South Korea. The South Korean government and people regard the current deployment as deeply threatening to the country's main population center - the Seoul metropolitan area. In a new environment of normalized relations, Pyongyang would have no legitimate justification for continuing its forward deployment of forces.

Again, China can play an important, constructive diplomatic role regarding that issue. Chinese officials need to convey to their North Korean counterparts that the redeployment is a necessary and appropriate concession, both on its own terms and to make certain that hawks in the US do not have a rallying cry to defeat the proposed normalization of relations between Washington and Pyongyang.

The Obama administration would be taking some considerable policy and political risks to offer a new relationship to North Korea. American advocates of the status quo will inevitably argue that the US would be making major concessions while getting very little in return. But it is evident that the current policy has not worked in the past, is not working now, and has little prospect of working in the future. Given that sobering reality, it is time to try something new.

And if Pyongyang reacted favorably, the outcome would be one of greatly reduced tensions on the Korean Peninsula - one of the most dangerous remaining military flashpoints in the world. That would be a great benefit to both Koreas, China, the US, and the entire East Asian region.

The bottom line is that Washington needs to adopt a bold alternative to the current strategy. When a policy has been in place for decades and is producing utterly sterile results, it is sheer folly to advocate staying the course.

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